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ABSTRACT

This document is the report of a committee charged with two tasks: (1) to examine the state recommended sequence of study and the recommended textbooks for purposes of determining whether or not North Carolina's students were afforded adequate opportunities to study the roles of religion in shaping the human heritage in the United States and the larger world; and (2) to report its findings and to make appropriate recommendations to the State Board of Education. The report contains background material about the importance of education about religion for understanding culture and history, textbook content, the legal issue of the separation of church and state and its implications for teaching religion as opposed to teaching about religion in the public schools, pedagogical issues, and the curriculum in areas other than social studies. Recommendations of the committee include: (1) adopting suggested revisions to the social studies section of the curriculum and the teacher handbook that accompanies it; (2) alerting textbook publishers and the state textbook commission of the changes; (3) taking steps to acquaint school administrators, school boards, and teachers with the law pertaining to teaching about religion in the school and with approaches to dealing with questions; (4) linking curriculum revision with provision for state wide staff development programs; and (5) considering the need for examining the teaching about religion in other curriculum areas. The committee suggests that history and social studies cannot be taught adequately without significant reference to the role of religion. (DK)

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Placement Of Religion In The Social Studies Curriculum

Committee Report

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SO 023 657

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
Raleigh, North Carolina
January, 1989

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INTRODUCTION

On June 7, 1988, Mr. Joseph B. Webb, Assistant State Superintendent for Instructional Services, acting on instruction from the State Board of Education, appointed a "Committee on Placement of Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum". The committee was charged with two tasks: (1) to examine the state-recommended sequence of study and the recommended textbooks for purposes of determining whether or not North Carolina's students were afforded adequate opportunities to study the roles of religion in shaping the human heritage in the United States and the larger world; and (2) to report its findings and to make appropriate recommendations to the State Board of Education.

The committee was organized as follows:

Burton Beers, Chair	Professor of History, North Carolina State University
Ivo Wortman, Vice-Chair	Superintendent, Harnett County Schools
Mary Morgan	Member, State Board of Education, Jacksonville
Warren Nord	Director, Program in Humanities and Human Values, UNC - Chapel Hill
Michael Renn	Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Greensboro City Schools
Dot Case	Teacher, Edneyville High School Henderson County
Teresa Battle	Teacher,Agnes Fullilove School Pitt County
Patsy Currin	Teacher, Cash Elementary School Winston-Salem/Forsyth County
Barbara Chapman	Special Assistant for Curriculum, Department of Public Instruction
Douglas Robertson	Assistant Director, Divison of Social Studies, Department of Public Instruction
John Ellington	Director, Division of Social Studies Department of Public Instruction

An injury suffered in an automobile accident prevented Ms. Battle from serving with the Committee. All other appointees were actively engaged in the Committee's work through the summer and fall. The "Findings," "Recommendations," and all other materials in this report have the unanimous support of the committee's members.

FINDINGS

Most people believe that it is the proper task of parents and their religious community to instill religious beliefs and values in children. This committee agrees. But while it is not the task of public education to change or challenge, promote or denigrate, the religious beliefs of students, it is the task of public education to inform students about the role of various religions in history and culture.

1. Religion is so important in world history and culture that an educated person in our society must know something of Western religious traditions, world religions, and the perspectives which they afford on important human issues. Teaching about religion is permitted within the framework of the current state-recommended sequence of courses in social studies. However, the curriculum explicitly specifies the inclusion of religious topics in only a limited number of instances.

2. No fewer than six recent studies, which have been conducted by individuals and organizations with quite different positions on religion and the place of religion in society, have found social studies textbooks to be seriously deficient in their treatment of religion. The committee's own survey of texts has led its members to accept this finding of these recent studies.

3. In cases dating from the 1940's, the courts, including the United States Supreme Court, have found unconstitutional a variety of in-school religious activities when they put the state in the position of supporting, endorsing, or celebrating religion. But the courts have stated emphatically that the Constitution has not barred teaching about religion in public schools. On the contrary, judges have noted the importance of learning about religion. The essential requirement is contained in the First Amendment's mandate that government be neutral between one religion and another, and between religion and non-religion.

4. Teaching about religion in a manner that meets this requirement of strict neutrality promises to be a delicate and complex assignment. A broad consensus appears to support the incorporation of teaching about religion in the social studies curriculum. However, there are widely divergent expectations within various groups as to what may be achieved through such change. Compounding the potential for controversy is the fact that most North Carolina social studies teachers have had limited opportunity to study religion beyond their own personal traditions. Like teachers elsewhere in the United States, our teachers have enjoyed few opportunities to study the sensitive issues that may arise in teaching about religion.

5. Social studies has been the focus of criticism regarding the neglect of teaching about religion. But other areas have also been challenged, and it seems unlikely that any area of the curriculum will be isolated from the discussion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The State Board of Education, as a first step, should adopt revisions to the social studies section of the Standard Course of Study as shown in Annex A. Second, the Board should direct the Department of Public Instruction to develop appropriate additions to or revisions of the Teacher Handbook consistent with these changes. (See Annex B for examples of how objectives may be changed or developed to reflect goal changes.)

2. The State Board of Education should inform the State Textbook Commission of changes in the Standard Course of Study and the Teacher Handbook and of the importance of selecting textbooks to reflect these changes. We also recommend that the State Board of Education take any other steps deemed appropriate to alert textbook publishers to the importance of the treatment of religion in textbooks.

3. The committee believes it important that local boards of education and school personnel understand the instructional responsibilities as well as the legal and ethical constraints inherent in teaching about religion. The State Board of Education should direct that steps be taken to acquaint school administrators, school boards, and teachers with the law pertaining to teaching about religion in the school and with approaches to dealing with questions that may arise out of the recommended revision of the social studies curriculum.

4. The State Board of Education, recognizing both the sensitivity and complexity of teaching about religion, should link curriculum revision with provision for state-wide staff development programs. These programs should be directed to the needs of school personnel at every level. Teacher training institutions should be informed of the importance of pre-service education about religion for social studies teachers.

5. The State Board of Education should consider the need for examining the teaching about religion in other curriculum areas.

Religion and the Social Studies Curriculum: Background Material

Within the last few years there has been a growing national consensus that religion has been excluded from the public school curriculum to the point where public education has been severely compromised. Early this summer, an extraordinary consortium of religious and educational organizations (hereafter, referred to as Consortium) issued a joint statement outlining the legitimate and important role of religion in public education and establishing guidelines for its treatment.[1] The Consortium of conservative to liberal organizations included, among others, the American Association of School Administrators, the American Federation of Teachers, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, the Christian Legal Society, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the National Council of Churches, the National Education Association, and the National School Boards Association. A recent Gallup Poll indicates that a large majority of Americans (79%) believe that teaching about the major religions of the world has a proper place in the school curriculum. (See Annex D) Moreover, a number of states have established a clear call for a more adequate treatment of religion in the curriculum and textbooks. This Committee believes this to be an excellent time for North Carolina to reevaluate the role of religion in the social studies curriculum.

1. The Importance of Education About Religion. Most people believe that it is the proper task of parents and their religious community to instill religious beliefs and values in children. This Committee agrees. But while it is not the task of public education to change or challenge, promote or denigrate, the religious beliefs of students, it is the task of public education to inform students about the role of various religions in history and culture.

We believe that religion is so important in our history and culture that any educated person should know something of the Western religious traditions, world religions, and various religious perspectives on important social issues. For example, students cannot understand what is happening in the Middle East without knowing something about Islam; they cannot understand many of the events and movements of Western history without knowing a great deal about Judaism and Christianity; they cannot understand the ongoing controversy over prayer in the schools without understanding something about American religious pluralism and the religion clauses of the First Amendment; they cannot understand the public discussion about abortion or changing sex roles without knowing something of the beliefs and values of various religious traditions.

In its statement, the Consortium of educational and religious organizations referred to above responded as follows to the question, "Why should study about religion be included in the public school curriculum?"

> "Because religion plays a significant role in history and society, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world. Omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life of humankind is insignificant or unimportant. Failure to understand even the basic symbols, practices, and concepts of the various religions makes much of history, literature, art, and contemporary life unintelligible.
>
> Study about religion is also important if students are to value religious liberty, the first freedom guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. Moreover, knowledge of the roles of religion in the past and present promotes cross-cultural understanding essential to democracy and world peace."

[1] "Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers," See Annex C.

For these reasons, this Committee recommends a number of changes in the Standard Course of Study and the Teacher Handbook, designed to integrate an understanding of the role of religion more fully into the social studies curriculum. Our primary concern is to ensure that religion is given its proper place in existing, required social studies courses. We see this not as a matter of according the study of religion any special status, but simply as recognition of the fact that history and social studies cannot be taught adequately without significant reference to the role of religion.

Note that we have chosen, in several grades, to add a competency goal to the list of goals. In addition, we are integrating references to religion into other goals. Adding the new goals at the end is in no way intended to indicate preferential order but is a matter of convenience so that large sections of the Standard Course of Study will not have to be revised. All goals are intended to guide planning throughout the course.

While our concern has been exclusively with the place of religion in the social studies curriculum as found in the Standard Course of Study, we are aware of the value of courses which deal primarily with various aspects of religion, and recommend that schools consider the possibility of offering elective courses in areas such as history of religion, world religions, or the Bible as literature.

2. Textbooks. Within the past several years at least six studies of public school textbooks (all focusing in large part on social studies texts) have found them to be seriously inadequate in their treatment of religion.[2] This unanimity is particularly striking in that the studies have been carried out by individuals and organizations with very different positions on religion and the role of religion in society. Paul Vitz, a defender of traditional values and conservative religion concluded in his study, commissioned by the Office of Education, that: "Religion, traditional family values, and conservative political and economic positions have been reliably excluded from children's textbooks."[3] People For the American Way, a non-partisan, educational organization established, in part, to counter the influence of the religious right, concluded:

> "These texts simply do not treat religion as a signigicant element in American life--it is not portrayed as an integrated part of the American value system or as something that is important to individual Americans. When religion is mentioned, it is just that--mentioned. In particular, most books give the impression that America suddenly turned into a secular state after the Civil War.[4]

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2 Paul C. Vitz, Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1986); Religion in the Curriculum (A Report of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1987); Paul Gagnon, Democracy's Untold Story: What the World History Textbooks Neglect (A publication of the Education for Democracy Project. 1987); Looking at History: a Review of Major U.S. History Textbooks (A report of People For the American Way. 1986); Charles C. Haynes, "Teaching About Religious Freedom in American Secondary Schools", (Americans United Research Foundation Religious Liberty Education Project Study I, 1985); and Warren A. Nord, "The Place of Religion in the World of Public School Textbooks" (forthcoming; a review of high school textbooks approved for use in North Carolina in history, economics, home economics, and biology).

3 Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks, 1.

4 Tony Podesta, "The Uphill Battle for Quality Textbooks," Religion and Public Education (Summer, 1986), 60. Podesta was President of People For the American Way at the time of the study.

The result has been that some state boards of education and national educational organizations have expressed concern about textbooks which do not take the study about religion seriously. For example, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has recommended:

> "5. Textbook selection committees at the state, district, and local school levels should require [fair and factual] treatment of religion in all curricular materials....
>
> 6. Publishers should revise textbooks and other instructional materials to provide adequate treatment of diverse religions and their roles in American and world culture and to include appropriate religious and moral themes in literary and art history anthologies.
>
> 7. A major research and development effort should be undertaken to develop new curricular materials and designs for teaching about religion within the various subject areas."5

We recognize that our religious pluralism, and differing understandings of the role of religion in history and culture, make the treatment of religion in textbooks difficult and potentially controversial. (This is, of course, a major reason why publishers have dropped religion from textbooks.) Nonetheless, there is much room for improvement, and reason to believe that constructive changes can be made. Therefore, this Committee recommends that North Carolina, through its textbook adoption procedures, encourage publishers to develop textbooks and collections of primary source materials which treat the study of religions in society more adequately than is now the case.

3. The Legal Issue. There is considerable confusion, both among educators and the general public, about the legal status of religion in public education. Some people wrongly believe that it is illegal to teach about religion.

Much of the current controversy over religion centers on a series of Supreme Court decisions, beginning in the 1940's, which have often been interpreted as removing religion from public education.6 So, for example, the courts have ruled a number of religious activities unconstitutional; in-school religious release-time, organized prayer, devotional Bible reading, the celebration of religious holidays, and the required teaching of creation-science. In each case, the courts have ruled that these activities put the state in the position of supporting, endorsing, or celebrating religion, thus violating the neutrality required by the First Amendment. As Justice Fortas wrote in Epperson v. Arkansas:

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5 Religion in the Curriculum, 35.

6 Significant content about religion has been absent from textbooks long before the various court rulings.

"Government in our democracy, state and national, must be neutral in matters of religious theory, doctrine and practice. It may not be hostile to any religion or to the advocacy of no-religion; and it may not aid, foster, or promote one religion or religious theory against another or even against the militant opposite. The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion."7

That government--and therefore the public schools--must not promote religion does not mean that religion must be absent from the curriculum, however. In fact, a number of justices have been eloquent in their claims that the study of religion is essential to good education. Writing for the court in Abington v. Schempp (in which the Court ruled devotional Bible reading to be unconstitutional) Justice Clark declared:

"(I)t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing that we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment."8

Justice Brennan, in a concurring opinion, wrote:

"The holding of the Court today plainly does not foreclose teaching about the Holy Scriptures or about the differences between religious sects in classes in literature or history. Indeed, whether or not the Bible is involved, it would be impossible to teach meaningfully many subjects in the social sciences or the humanities without some mention of religion."9

The distinction between promoting religion on the one hand, and teaching about it on the other, has become well established not only in court rulings but in a wealth of pedagogical writings about the role of religion in public education. To cite the Consortium statement again:

"The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional.

The school may strive for student awareness of religions, but should not press for student acceptance of any one religion.

The school may sponsor study about religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion.

The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view.

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7 Epperson v. Arkansas 393 U.S. 97, 103-104 (1968)

8 School District of Abington Township v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 225 (1963)

9 School District of Abington Township v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 300 (1963)

> The school may educate about all religions, but may not promote or denigrate any religion.
>
> The school may inform the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to conform him or her to any particular belief."10

If it is not always clear on which side of the divide an activity falls, the general principle and the great majority of cases are clear.

The role of religion in the curriculum is only one aspect of the role of religion in public education. Given the great confusion which continues to exist regarding such matters as school prayer, the celebration of religious holidays, and the access of religious groups to school facilities, we believe that the State Board of Education should consider distributing guidelines and model school policies for use by local boards.

This Committee recognizes that some people in our society would like to repeal the religion clauses of the First Amendment; others would reinterpret its meaning from what the Supreme Court takes it to be. Nonetheless, in our society law is ultimately interpreted by the Supreme Court, and it has established a history of relatively consistent rulings about the role of religion in public education over the last forty years. Our recommendations are carefully constructed to accord with the First Amendment as the Supreme Court interprets it. 11

4. Pedagogical Issues. North Carolina, like the United States generally, is becoming increasingly pluralistic. Given the growth of religious pluralism and confusion about what the law allows and requires, this Committee could not be more aware of the need for understanding and sensitivity in teaching about religion in the classroom. We know that religious stereotypes are widespread and that religious prejudice exists. Many educators, like the general population, have not been exposed to religious traditions other than their own; and some lack the skills necessary for dealing with religious matters of great sensitivity. And we know that the role of religion in public education is an issue of considerable controversy within many communities.

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10 The Consortium statement is based on guidelines originally published by the Public Education Religion Studies Center at Wright State University.

11 An excellent summary of court rulings, particularly as they apply to North Carolina, can be found in Benjamin Sendor, "Religion and the Public Schools," in Education Law in North Carolina (A Publication of the UNC Institute of Government, 1987). Also see the American Association of School Administrators' booklet entitled, Religion in the Public Schools, (1986).

However, we believe strongly that the current situation only prolongs existing ignorance and prejudice. We believe that substantial, if incremental, improvements are possible. We acknowledge that a considerable amount of effort will be required to do the task well. We need not just better textbooks, but teachers who are better educated, administrators and school boards who can provide appropriate support; guidance, and community leadership and a more informed citizenry. We also recognize an important role for parents to be more knowledgable about and sensitive to the legal and pedagogical implications of teaching about religion in the public schools. We also note that while teaching about religion is a matter of sensitivity at all levels, this is especially true in the early grades.

For all these reasons, we recommend the development of intensive summer institutes and in-service workshops for all school personnel including school board members. We also suggest that recommendations for including religion in pre-service coursework be developed. 12

We are particularly concerned about the impressionability of children and the potential for proselytizing--whether intended or not. With increasing age and maturity, students are better able to understand religion. Therefore, our recommendation for incorporating lessons about religion in the social studies curriculum is directed to the middle and upper grades.

5. The Curriculum in Areas Other Than Social Studies. Continuing public controversy, a number of recent court decisions and several of the textbooks studies have raised important questions about the role of religion in parts of the curriculum other than social studies.13 While this Committee has not reviewed either textbooks or the Standard Course of Study in these ares, we recommend that the Board consider a review of other curriculum areas.

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12 Model summer seminars have been developed by the Program in the Humanities and Human Values at UNC-Chapel Hill. The first, for English and Social Studies teachers, explores the role of religion in the teaching of American history and literature; the second, for teams of administrators, local board members, and teachers, deals with religion and school policy.

13 Three court rulings in the last year and a half have dealt with religion in parts of the curriculum other than social studies: Mozert v. Hawkins County Schools dealt with elementary school reading texts; Smith v. Board of School Commissioners, Mobile County dealt with home economics as well as history and social studies texts; and Aguillard v. Edwards concerned the teaching of evolution and creation-science. The Vitz study, cited above, was critical of reading texts, and the Nord study raised questions about home economics and biology textbooks. The relationship of religion to sex education and guidance programs has been a matter of serious public discussion in recent years.